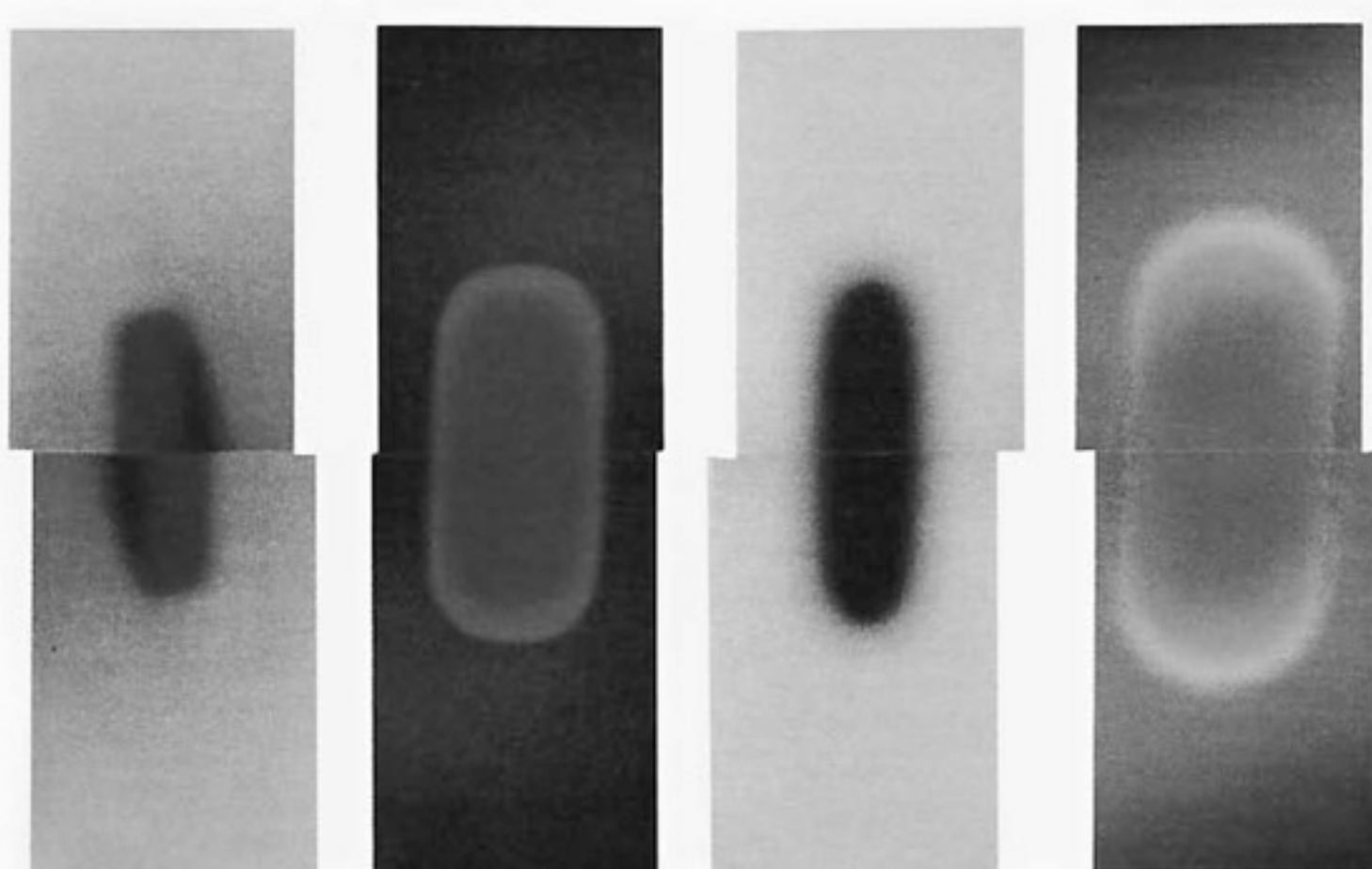


Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts

November 9, 1996 – January 12, 1997

Cover and inside cover image:
Untitled (Ends), 1992-96
chromogenic color prints
each 12 x 4 inches



the process in such a way that the image does not directly recall the object at all. The image becomes a documentation of the process.

KA: What do you mean by "subvert the process"?

PU: I am using the camera in a way it was not intended to be used. By allowing the image to be out of focus or by over- or underexposing the film, I make the camera function in a non-traditional way. The resulting images have no surface detail or context; I am left with just the elemental form of the thing.

KA: You seem to be exploring how objects are perceived not just by the individual, but by the camera as well.

PU: The camera is a perceptual tool. Its focus and aperture mechanisms are intended to mimic how we visually perceive. All the objects I photograph are common household objects—things you would recognize immediately if the camera were accurately focused. By photographing objects we know very well in a way that makes them hardly recognizable, with no surface definition or spatial context, I provide just the essence of the form we know. In this way I am presenting an alternate view of the object, but one that only the camera enables me to see and record. The camera allows me to look at an object directly, but without detail—which is more typical of peripheral vision.

KA: What is the importance of this peripheral vision? Would you say it is a less conscious way of perceiving?

PU: I would. When you look at something, you focus on what you are conscious of. But there is a lot of other visual information that you take in as well, through your peripheral vision. I think in some ways this information is just as important as what you are focusing on, if not more so, because this peripheral data informs your experience of and relationship to the environment in an emotional and physical way. It is not the spot directly in front of you that makes you

relaxed or uncomfortable; it is the myriad of other information around you that you consciously or subconsciously absorb.

KA: Many of the forms in your photographs have an organic quality to them. Do they suggest living forms to you?

PU: Yes. I am fascinated by the visual transformation of an object into an organic, biomorphic form by this perceptual tool, the camera. I use "man-made" tools to record "man-made" objects, but the resulting image does not seem "man-made" at all. In my most recent work, the final images look like something that could be growing in a science project or inside you. Even though they are all out of focus photographs of common objects, the images suggest living organisms. The "man-made" objects end up looking like us when processed this way. In some of my earlier work, such as *Untitled (Ends)*, the symmetry of the objects evoked anthropomorphic forms, suggesting not simply a living organism but an entire living body to some degree.

KA: You use the computer in creating some of your photographs. How does that work?

PU: Well, as I was exploring the idea of images that were the result of multiple processes and how these images resemble the human body in various ways, I started playing with a computer. The computer fit into this way of working because it is a tool that can generate hundreds of drawings from one simple form in very little time, which to me is like a cell dividing or mutating. I started photographing these drawings, then duplicating the photographs and pairing them—splicing them and putting the identical pieces together—so that I had a situation that resembled an out of control growth mutating into hundreds of hybrid forms. Except they weren't hybrids at all—they came from exactly the same form to begin with.

Penelope Umbrico: Between Body and Object

Penelope Umbrico is a fine art photographer who lives and works in New York City. Formally trained as a painter, Umbrico became interested in photography and its expressive qualities while working on her Master of Fine Arts degree at the School of Visual Arts, New York. She has continued to experiment with this medium throughout her career, creating photographs that do not fall easily into any specific category. In her photographs, Umbrico explores formal qualities like shape and color as well as psychological and physiological issues such as perception. Her art causes us not only to reevaluate how we perceive reality, but also to question what constitutes reality itself. The following interview with the artist addresses some of these issues.

KA: The photographs in this exhibition might be described as abstract because one cannot discern recognizable subject matter. What interests you about exploring abstraction in photography?

PU: Abstraction in photography is interesting because whether you can discern the subject matter or not, a photograph is a record of what the camera was focusing on when the film was exposed to light. As a result, there is always a reference to the thing you take the picture of. So these works are not exactly abstract in the sense of Abstract Expressionism, even though the two share a formal similarity.

KA: Abstract Expressionism was about having no preexisting reference point and letting an abstract form express a subjective emotion and meaning. In contrast, by using the photographic process, you end up with something that is inherently based on objective, as opposed to subjective, "reality."

PU: Exactly. The referent is always there, although you may not be able to determine exactly what it is. It interests me to use a process—photography—where a specific object is recorded as the reference point and to subvert

KA: So, again, the notion of perception comes into play. We perceive each work as a single, individualized form that is different in some way from all the others when, in reality, they are all versions of the same original computer drawing.

PU: More than perception, though, is the question of originality and duplication. None of the spliced photographs are really individual. As you say, they are all duplicates from the same drawing. But the drawing isn't even original. It is just one of a hundred variations made from the same form.

KA: Many of your works of art consist of multiple or group images that deal with the idea of collections. Does this apply to your single images as well?

PU: The idea of documentation and display is important in relation to the multiples. It is as though I am making an inventory of these objects and then presenting them for you to see. They become collections of many like objects when put together. I am definitely not interested in making singular images that work formally on their own, although some of them may end up working that way. In my earlier work I was assembling objects into collections, and now I am interested in working with already existing groups of objects. A lot of my most recent work was photographed out of consumer catalogues. I photograph the already assembled objects the catalogue presents to us, whose message is "you need this," and transform these objects into corporal forms, where the message becomes "you are this."

KA: In your video work this transformation seems to come full circle. Can you explain what is going on?

PU: The video camera's auto-focus mechanism cannot focus on what I give it to record—in this case, an out of focus photograph of an object. The lens constantly shifts back and forth as it attempts to focus so the resulting image is a blurry, orb-like form throbbing like a living organ.

KA: Again, something completely inanimate appears to be alive even though we know it is not.

PU: Here something completely inanimate becomes animate through the process of a perceptual tool—the video camera's auto-focus lens—which was created to capture animated life and render it inanimate.

KA: So it is the process that is important here?

PU: Right. It is analogous to our own experience of processing information and transforming it into a comprehensible form.

KA: Would you say that this is what your work is essentially about?

PU: Yes. I am exploring the relationship between processing and perception, both of which have to do with the camera and the body, the mass-produced object and our relationship to it.

Penelope Umbrico continues to create visually compelling photographs that challenge the viewer intellectually as well as psychologically. Her art engages us with its interesting shapes and plays of color. The intriguing, almost mysterious qualities of the work induce us to try to decipher what the subject matter is and what techniques were used to create the images. Umbrico also prompts us to question reality by using such technological innovations as computers and video equipment to further blur the boundaries between art and life. As a result, her mysterious organic images become representations of not only ourselves but of the world around us.

Guest curator Kelly Adams lives and works in New York City.



Untitled (Computer Drawings), 1993
chromogenic color prints
each 8½ x 6½ inches